

# DOG WHISTLE POLITICS

HOW CODED RACIAL APPEALS  
HAVE REINVENTED RACISM AND  
WRECKED THE MIDDLE CLASS

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## What's the Matter with White Voters? Commonsense Racism

*At base, dog whistle politics exploits race to lure middle-class whites into voting for politicians allied with the rich and powerful. Why do white voters fall for the trick? This chapter explores how race works at the level of those who "hear" dog whistle appeals.*

**T**he certainty that Reagan Democrats vote against their own interests runs broadly through liberal complaints about modern politics. Exemplifying this, Thomas Frank persuasively argues that Republicans employ social wedge issues to hoodwink members of the working and middle class. In *What's the Matter with Kansas* (2004), Frank leads an energetic if disheartening romp through the culture-war politics of America's rightward lurch, cataloging the social issues such as abortion, gay rights, school prayer, pornography, guns, and religious fundamentalism that the GOP has married to plutocracy-friendly priorities such as deregulation, privatization, tax cuts for the rich, and slashed social services for everyone else. He's particularly devastating in his insight that the purveyors of cultural conflict depend on a polity continually roiled by social issues, and concomitantly distracted from focusing on the disastrous consequences to their livelihoods that follow from their votes. "The trick never ages; the illusion never wears off. *Vote* to stop abortion; *recite* a rollback in capital gains tax. *Vote* to make our country strong again; *recite* deindustrialization." Frank's trenchant analysis convincingly reveals the various patterns of rightwing demagoguery. And as we now know, race-baiting has been integral to this.

But not according to Frank. On the contrary, he ridicules those who attribute backlash politics in substantial part to race, caricaturing such claims as daff theories about “crypto-racism” or “the protests of ‘angry white men.’” This is stale logic, according to Frank. “Ask a liberal pundit what ails the red states,” he bemoans, “and he will probably tell you it’s all because of racism.” This just doesn’t hold water, Frank contends. Kansas—and by extension the United States—“cannot easily be dismissed as a nest of bigots. Kansas does not have Trent Lott’s disease. It is not Alabama in the sixties.” Kansas and country may embrace a lot of crazy, self-defeating antipathies, Frank acknowledges, “but one thing it doesn’t do is racism.”

Frank is right, but also wrong. He’s right that Kansas isn’t Alabama in the 1960s. Then again, even Alabama isn’t Alabama in the 1960s (exhibit A: arch-segregationist George Wallace repudiated his previous racism on his way to re-election as governor in 1982).<sup>2</sup> Frank is wrong because he fatally misses how quickly and dramatically racism has evolved. In proclaiming that America “doesn’t do racism,” Frank misunderstands racism as an open endorsement of white supremacy. Hence Frank’s reference to Trent Lott. In 2002, the Republican senator from Mississippi gave a speech extolling the 1948 pro-segregation presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond, saying, “We voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over the years, either.”<sup>3</sup> The Lotts of this world—the dwindling number of public leaders foolish enough to publicly avow segregation and white supremacy—are quickly repudiated, including by Republicans. But as we have seen, this is far from the end of racism.

No doubt Frank is correct that for some voters race has nothing to do with their conservative proclivities. Yet it’s also overwhelmingly clear that race contributes to broad-based support for regressive policies that wreck the middle class. So how does race convince some white voters to vote against their interests? Or, to paraphrase Frank’s evocative title, what’s the matter with white voters?

## ■ WHAT “INTERESTS”?

Before turning to how race might influence voters, let’s start with the preliminary question of whether in fact whites necessarily undercut their “interests” when they respond to appeals for racial solidarity. Obviously, if it turned out that some whites had good reasons for voting along racial lines, that alone would go far toward explaining the power of dog whistling. As we shall see,

whites *do* have some interests in supporting continued white dominance—but these actual interests are dwarfed by the delusion that racial solidarity will restore a mythical middle-class wonderland.

The allegation that people “vote against their own interests” typically takes the following form: *some voters are led astray by appeals to social concerns and do not recognize their actual economic interests.* This proposition distinguishes between social values on the one hand and pocketbook interests on the other; in doing so, it establishes an implicit hierarchy ranking ostensibly hard-edged economic interests over supposedly mushy social concerns. But frequently social values are deeply held, and also, what’s economic and what’s social cannot be neatly separated. For instance, explaining why white voters in the North might be open to racial appeals from Republicans, in 1963 political columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak offered this analysis: “The white construction worker sees lowering the color bar in his Jim Crow union as a threat to his job. The lower middle class suburbanite, who has invested much of his savings in his home, sees the Negro who wants to live next door to him as a financial threat.”<sup>4</sup> Economic and social interests are often intertwined.

Understanding this, we can now ask: what interests might whites have in racial appeals, or more generally, in supporting the continued privileged position of whites? In what follows, I distinguish racial status, class status, and actual economic losses; the better to explain these various elements—but this separation is artificial, as in practice these often overlap.

*Racial status.* Consider how whites benefit from the social prestige associated with being white. It’s easiest to see how this operates by looking to the past, to racial episodes not presently shrouded by racial commonsense. Consider Little Rock, Arkansas, in the fall of 1957, when federal troops arrived to help force school integration. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus had promised that “blood would run in the streets” before black children would enter Little Rock’s Central High School, and when some children first tried, a howling mob of angry whites and the fixed bayonets of the Arkansas National Guard turned them back. Under the protection of federal troops, nine young African American students tried again, finally marching into the main building between phalanxes of soldiers protecting them from the furious crowds.

What aroused the white mob? Yes, many reacted out of hatred, yet beneath that something deeper operated. The crowds massed primarily to protect a social order that draped whites in the velvet robe of unquestionable superiority. Reared in the cradle of white supremacy, integration violated what many whites perceived as the natural order, a hierarchy so thorough it saturated the Southern milieu. In this context, the concept of black equality was truly radical,

for it promised to upend the entire social world. Many whites experienced this as an affront—a violation of their obvious superiority, an attack on their exalted status. In turn, this triggered strong emotional responses: anger, rage, fear, and fury surged to the surface. Yet all too often, we construe the emotions as the source of the reaction rather than as an expression of a deeper conflict. Racial bile did not lead many whites to oppose integration. Rather, threats to their supremacy made many whites oppose and indeed hate integration.

*Class status.* Throughout this book we've talked in terms of a broad economic middle class to describe the breadth of those who suffer from assaults on New Deal liberalism. Here, it's important to note that class divisions nevertheless exist within this range, and within the white middle class these divisions interact powerfully with race. Again, Little Rock helps lay this bare.

When Central High was the only white high school, race obfuscated class lines among whites, as the children of laborers attended school with the children of doctors and lawyers. Their proximity, and their whiteness, suggested less social distance than class divisions otherwise might imply. In the midst of resisting integration, however, Little Rock opted to build a new public high school in the more affluent northwestern part of the city. Opening in the fall of 1957, the new school took the wealthier students who had previously attended Central, just as Central began to integrate. Those left behind felt that “working-class whites became the guinea pigs in the integration experiment at Central.”<sup>7</sup> Little Rock demonstrates in microcosm a larger dynamic: the white working class has largely shouldered the costs of school, neighborhood, and job integration, while white professionals have mainly avoided integration by retreating to private academies, gated suburbs, and protected professional worlds. Their ability to flee integration reflects both the resources available to better-off whites, as well as the greater sway they exercise over government. As a result, well-off whites have experienced integration only on their own terms—in controlled settings, such as elite colleges and universities, and with only token numbers of nonwhites. Beyond these managed interactions with integration, well-off whites remain the most racially isolated group in the United States.

Where race previously obscured class divisions among whites, now it came to exaggerate them. For many whites, the measure of whether they've made it increasingly turns on being able to set the terms with which they associate with minorities. Social critic Rich Benjamin describes one version of this, explaining how for many middle-class whites, by the 1990s everything good in life seemed to depend on having enough money to escape to what Benjamin describes as “Whitopia”—“a constellation of small towns and so-called ‘exurbs’ that are extremely white . . . communal pods that cannily preserve a white-bread

world, a throwback to the imagined past with ‘authentic’ 1950s values and the nifty suburban amenities available today.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, dystopia came to mean places peopled by nonwhites. To suffer downward class mobility meant having to rub shoulders with nonwhites at every turn—even if one lived in the same house, worked at the same job, and sent one's kids to the same schools that, when all white, had marked middle-class status.

*Actual economic losses.* Beyond the loss of status, working-class whites also suffered material losses associated with integration. Poorer whites who lacked the financial resources to resist the pressures of integration slowly lost exclusive control of their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, their most valuable possessions. They rightly viewed these as sources of their well-being and launching pads for their children: homes that held most of their wealth; neighborhoods that supplied a sense of community; jobs that delivered decent pay and maybe someday had a place for one's child; schools that seemed like escalators to take the next generation higher. This was about more than status. This was about access to union jobs, government mortgages, decent schools, effective public services, and government-funded amenities like nice public parks and swimming pools—all of which had been reserved for whites, often formally and in any event by social sanction.

Having to share these resources with nonwhites was costly—in the same way that having to share a single pie with more people means smaller slices for everyone. This zero-sum result was not inevitable: a political establishment committed to fostering integration could have offset these costs, or even provided resources to grow the pie for the lower- and middle-class, white and nonwhite alike. But the reality was otherwise, and the pattern set in Little Rock continued throughout the country: rather than integration bringing more resources into working-class white communities, it often brought less. Public dollars that had once paid for everything from good schools to swimming pools dwindled once voters came to perceive minorities as the beneficiaries—often as a function of dog whistle politics on the local level.<sup>9</sup> As a result, whites who lacked the financial resources to escape integration often found themselves confronting more claims on the same—and very often fewer—resources.

To be sure, this is a highly artificial way to talk about integration's costs. Whites did not greet the newcomers simply as more folks moving into the neighborhood; rather, race profoundly distorted their reactions in numerous ways. We'll turn to that in a moment. For now, though, the point is that whites had an interest in opposing integration completely apart from racial antipathy: first, integration created more demands on their schools, neighborhoods, and jobs; second, integration often lead to cuts in resources.

*Imagined losses:* There are some actual interests—racial status, class status, and material losses—that may cause whites to support politicians who signal racial solidarity. But these interests are dwarfed by a racial imagination that often heaps blame on nonwhites for almost every reversal in the fortunes of the white middle class over the last 50 years. Illustrating the power of imagined losses more than of real harms, though lower-class whites have encountered the greatest costs from integration, the defection among whites from the Democratic Party has *not* been led by the working class. Among whites, anti-black hostility seems largely *disconnected* from “direct racial threats to whites’ private lives (to their jobs, their neighborhoods, their children’s schooling, their families’ safety).”<sup>8</sup> Rather, it has been principally those able to racially isolate themselves that have left the Democratic party in the greatest numbers.<sup>9</sup> The retreat of wealthier whites to suburbs did not reduce racial conservatism, it led to its acceleration.<sup>10</sup> Dog whistle politics has convinced a number of whites to vote their fears about minorities, and yet, for those prone to do so most aggressively, their fears have little basis in the reality of their segregated lives.

There’s a classic film from 1993 that can help us see the exaggerated scale of the blame many whites put on minorities. In *Falling Down*, Michael Douglas’s character, William Foster, descends into a violent racial rampage. The movie grounds Foster in the economic malaise that resulted from the Reagan era, when financial deregulation led to an economic recession that rattled the country for years. In Foster’s backstory, he has been fired from his defense industry job, leaving him marooned and unable to find an engineering position in the wounded economy. Foster has spent months mimicking the routine of going to a nonexistent job, seeking to preserve as long as possible his dignity and even his sanity. He eventually loses his grip, though, in encounters with nonwhites that precipitate Foster’s mental breakdown. Stumbling through Los Angeles in a short-sleeve button-down shirt complete with pocket protector and pens, nonwhites he can neither avoid nor fathom accost Foster at every turn: the rude Asian grocer, the threatening Latino gangsters. Foster turns increasingly violent—but no old-style racist, for good measure he shoots a white supremacist among others in his bloody rampage. Nevertheless, it’s nonwhites, in their aggressive disrespect toward him, who symbolize the destroyers of what he nostalgically mourns: a safe world of polite white people with good jobs, nice homes, and tidy lawns.

Many whites seem to follow Foster in blaming minorities for much of the hardship in their lives. Integration began in earnest in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as one of the longest sustained periods of economic growth in the United States slowed and the dislocating forces of globalization and

deindustrialization gathered speed. In these years, whites began to suffer a number of shocks to their livelihood: factory closings, stagnating wages, increasing inflation, and eroding pensions. These economic challenges have only increased over the last 40 years, including during the recession in the late 1980s and, of course, in the Great Recession of 2008. The causes have been complex, including major structural changes and important shifts in government policy—shifts that partly reflect the power of dog whistle politics. Yet the very magnitude and complexity of the forces behind the worsening economic plight of the white middle and working class have impeded straightforward analysis.

In this vacuum, nonwhites—relatively powerless and widely demeaned, though also steadily increasing in numbers—became a convenient scapegoat. Many whites came to attribute job losses, shrinking savings, and declining opportunities to integration specifically and nonwhites generally. Recall how Michigan Democrats who defected to Reagan perceived their woes: “Blacks constitute the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives; not being black is what constitutes being middle class; not living with blacks is what makes a neighborhood a decent place to live.”<sup>11</sup> Or reflect on the plaintive Tea Party wail, “We want our country back.” Presumably they mean back from a black president, and a return to a national Whittopia.

This imagined ideal gains the strains of paradise not simply from the absence of nonwhites; rather, its halcyon quality stems from the misapprehension that reducing the presence of nonwhites will bring back an America in which hard work and playing by the rules guarantees financial stability and a secure retirement. Many older whites nostalgically pine for the days when a solid work ethic meant a good job, a decent home, a new car every few years, an affordable college education for the kids, and a nice vacation by the lake or seashore every August. Their children may not want to return to a *Leisure It to Beaver* world, but still yearn for a society of increasing opportunities for people like themselves, a vision that tends to erase most minorities. These imagined worlds—the one recalled from the past by the older generation and the one wished for by those starting out—are fairytales.

But even so, in their shared celebration of work, stability, and upward mobility, we can recognize the kernel of these dreams: the ache for a world of middle-class prosperity. This desperation for economic security helps bring into sharp relief the dramatic losses that the middle class has suffered over the last five decades. The way forward is through a return to liberal governance. Yet, partly due to the insistent badgering of dog whistle politics, many whites

imagine instead that the challenges in their lives stem from the increasing presence of nonwhites, and can best be solved by further reducing the power of activist government.

## ■ HEARING THE DOG WHISTLE

Imagining that minorities are the root problem in society makes many whites receptive to dog whistle appeals spreading that message. But what does it mean to “hear” a racial dog whistle? Do those who respond clearly perceive a message of racial salvation? Or instead are most whites unaware of the racial solicitations to which they nevertheless respond? I’ve mentioned before the contention that, for most whites, racial appeals work on the level of commonsense. Let’s explore that further.

Seeking to discover precisely how coded racial appeals work, Princeton politics professor Tali Mendelberg closely studied the Willie Horton campaign strategy that helped elect George H.W. Bush in 1988.<sup>12</sup> The Horton episode provided something of a natural experiment for testing whether race-baiting is unconsciously or instead clearly heard because it operated in two phases, one in which race was implicit and the other where it was expressly foregrounded.

In keeping with dog whistle strategy, when the Bush team introduced the Horton story—a convicted murderer released on furlough who assaulted a couple, raping the woman—the campaign left the crucial racial element to be conveyed by images, but took great pains to never say expressly that Horton was black and his victims were white. Likewise, media stories on Horton and the furlough program very rarely referenced race directly. Reporters seemed to be following a colorblind script, refusing to mention what lay plainly in view. The net result was that, up until about two weeks before the election, race provided the emotional punch of the Horton story, but no one talked about Horton and race openly.

That changed on October 21, when civil rights leader and Democratic powerhouse Jesse Jackson charged at a press conference that the whole Horton affair stood at the heart of a larger strategy to stir racial animosities, saying, “There have been a number of rather ugly race-conscious signals sent from that campaign.”<sup>13</sup> While Dukakis himself avoided the issue, within a couple of days the presidential nominee’s running mate seconded Jackson’s charge. Dukakis’s campaign manager then went on record with the *New York Times*, stating that “There is no stronger metaphor for racial hatred in our country than the black man raping the white woman,” and adding, “If you were going to run a campaign

of fear and smear and appeal to racial hatred you could not have picked a better case to use than this one.”<sup>14</sup>

Having punched race into the campaign, the Bush camp parried the charges, expressing outrage that anyone would allege such despicable behavior. True to the script, Bush also played the aggrieved victim, proclaiming, “there is not a racist bone in my body.”<sup>15</sup> The media largely accepted the denials, treating the allegations as desperate Democratic mudslinging. It would take three years, numerous investigations of the campaign, and the Bush administration’s repeated hostility toward civil rights, to convince most reporters that the Horton campaign had indeed amounted to intentional racial demagoguery.<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding the media’s tardy arrival at the truth, though, in the days after Jackson first aired the race-baiting accusation, coverage of Horton changed dramatically. For the final two weeks of the campaign, reporters often directly tied Horton to race. They did not credit the allegations of racial pandering, but they nevertheless reported them. Skeptical or not, the media now openly discussed the racial dimensions of the Horton ads and campaign mailings.

To tease out how racial appeals work, Mendelberg examined support for Bush before and after Jackson brought race to the fore. If voters consciously received and welcomed racial appeals, she expected to see support for Bush remain the same or even increase after October 21. After all, if the message of racial solidarity was clear to voters, nothing would change once the cover of racial neutrality was stripped away: if anything, the message would become even clearer. If this was correct, then dog whistle politicians code their race-baiting to escape public censure, but not to fool their intended audience.

But on the other hand, if coded racial appeals worked at an unconscious level, Mendelberg expected support for Bush to fall off once race became foregrounded. She reasoned that if those who respond to dog whistles “hear” race unconsciously, but consciously embrace the national ethos of racial equality, then the eruption of race into consciousness should reduce support for racial demagoguery. In this event, racial code words hide race even from the intended audience.

Mendelberg found that support for Bush rose precipitously during the early phase of the Horton campaign, and then plummeted sharply once Jackson showed race to the surface. Concludes Mendelberg, “Keeping the message implicit was important to its ability to achieve the intended result of mobilizing whites’ racial fears, stereotypes, and resentments. When the racial nature of the message was explicitly pointed out, it lost much of its racial power.”<sup>17</sup> This result strongly suggests that most of those who respond to dog whistles do not consciously hear them as racial appeals. They do not say to themselves, *I’m voting*

for politician *W* because he's on my racial team. Rather, dog whistle appeals remain inaudible to most, instead resonating with their unconscious racial anxieties and eliciting support only so long as they remain hidden. It seems that dog whistle politicians manipulate these background views and emotions, but succeed with most whites only so long as the racial appeals stay below conscious recognition.

To test this in a more controlled environment, Mendelberg carefully crafted a psychological experiment, fabricating brief news segments purporting to cover a fictional gubernatorial candidate named "Hayes." In two nearly identical segments, a faux newscaster discussed Hayes's position on welfare, while a background visual depicted black welfare recipients. In the "implicit" version, the script did not reference race directly; the "explicit" version did reference race, by adding the italicized phrases:

The candidates are taking very different positions concerning New Jersey's welfare budget. Hayes says that people, especially *African Americans*, take advantage of welfare at the expense of hard-working taxpayers. He claims that welfare has become a way of life for many, especially for *African Americans*, and criticized New Jersey's above-average rates of welfare cheating. He says able-bodied welfare recipients should have to work in return for benefits.

Mendelberg found that whites holding strongly stereotypical views of blacks were very likely to support Hayes, so long as they did not judge the appeal to be racial in nature. In contrast, once they understood Hayes to be invoking race, their support dropped to the level shown by whites who only weakly subscribed to stereotypical views. Mendelberg summarized her findings thus: "A message is at its most powerful when it contains racial content but is not consciously recognized as racial. A message backfires among the very constituency it targets when it contains racial content that triggers the realization that it is in fact a racial appeal."<sup>18</sup>

Mendelberg understandably took hope from this result. It suggests that dog whistle voters are themselves victims of manipulation, rather than covert racists. It intimates that rather than being committed to racial politics, most whites resoundingly reject it when it's brought into the light. And it implies that a remedy for race-baiting lies readily at hand in public denunciations. "Transforming an implicit appeal into an explicit one is among the surest ways to neutralize it," Mendelberg wrote in her concluding chapter. "The counterstrategy of remaining silent on race in the face of an implicit racial appeal is a losing strategy. More effective is the counterstrategy of bringing race to the surface, of

showing the racial meaning of the message and thus preventing the opposition from using race in a deniable way."<sup>19</sup>

Mendelberg's work adds powerful ammunition to the argument that liberals sabotage themselves when they acquiesce to the colorblind demand to avoid all race talk. She makes a very strong case that liberals must instead address racial pandering head on. We'll return to this argument in the solutions chapter, sketching how to effectively name and critique dog whistle frames.

Before leaving this discussion, though, we should temper the optimism that simply calling out race-baiting can defeat the phenomenon. In Chapter Six we outlined how conservatives repulse charges of racial pandering with the "playing the race card" kick, and also with accusations that they've been maligned for being Klan members. Liberals publicly denouncing dog whistling will have to overcome these retorts, and in addition will confront another large hurdle: the resistance of many whites to recognizing racial dynamics.

Consider a startling finding that Mendelberg reports but makes little of: when she asked respondents to judge whether the fictitious news reports invoked race, surprisingly few discerned racial appeals. In the "implicit" case, recall, the newscaster reported that the candidate talked of persons who "take advantage of welfare at the expense of hard-working taxpayers," while the background visuals flashed images of black welfare recipients. Among the white respondents who viewed this clip, only one in five perceived it as "a racial appeal."<sup>20</sup> What then of the "explicit" report, which carried the same background visuals and in addition featured the candidate condemning "welfare [as] a way of life for many, especially for African Americans"? Even here, where race virtually slipped respondents in the face, only half categorized this report as embodying a racial appeal: the other half didn't see it as racial at all.<sup>21</sup> Mendelberg reports that whites temper their response to dog whistle pandering once they understand a political appeal as racial. But it may take quite a bit to get most whites to that point.

Here's an illustration from the 2012 Republican primaries. While stumping in Iowa, a videotape caught Rick Santorum saying the following about food stamps: "I don't want to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money. I want to give them the opportunity to go out and earn their money and provide for themselves and their families." Challenged over these remarks, Santorum subsequently denied that he had said "black," instead lamely claiming he had stumbled over another word—as Charles Blow reported, "Now he's saying that he didn't say 'black people' at all but that he started to say a word and then sort of mumbled it and changed my thought."<sup>22</sup> Blow's response: "Pause as I look askance and hum an incredulous, 'Uh huh.'"<sup>23</sup>

Santorum surely regretted blurring it out, but the tape is clear, and in addition the statement corresponds to standard rightwing thinking: of course he said “black people.”<sup>23</sup>

But more interesting is how Santorum’s audience reacted, both immediately and as the controversy gained steam. The crowd in the room did not gasp or object; instead, after Santorum gaffed, the all-white audience reacted with applause. It’s unlikely they intended to cheer a racist statement. Instead, they probably failed to note the Freudian slip, instead merely hearing what was already in their minds the minute talk turned to food stamps. Eighty-four percent of those receiving food stamps in Iowa are white, and only nine percent are black.<sup>24</sup> But criticizing the government’s welfare policies in race-coded terms has become a staple of dog whistle racism, so routine that the occasional use of express racial language can easily pass unnoticed.

What, then, of the reaction to Santorum once the racial element of his remarks became a source of controversy? It seemed there was little or no backlash against Santorum—not for insinuating that black people were the quintessential welfare recipients, and not for subsequently lying about it either. The linkage of blacks and welfare seemed so self-evident, so “true” to Santorum’s target audience, that they seemed to see nothing wrong in his blunder, and no fault in his prevaricating to defend himself. Santorum campaigned as the embodiment of conservative rectitude, from his righteous condemnations of homosexuality down to his earnest sweater vests suggesting old-fashioned honesty and probity. Yet the GOP primary voters seemed to see no hypocrisy in his evident mendacity—most likely, we might surmise, because they knew what he meant, and were certain it was not racially unfair or offensive. Many voters may refuse to recognize even express racial appeals as violating anti-racist norms.

There is a final caution. Making it even more unlikely whites will recognize racial manipulation in action, coded race-baiting continuously evolves. Mendelberg reports that though it took three years, the media eventually came to the consensus that the Bush camp had deployed Horton as a racial tactic. Today, “Willie Horton” serves as a generic reference to political race-baiting, a shorthand term for racial demagoguery. No doubt contemporary reporters benefit from this, standing much more ready to condemn dog whistle racism that uses grainy mug shots and trades on narratives of black men raping white women. This marks genuine progress in combating dog whistle racism. Yet if one traces the phenomenon since its inception with Wallace and Goldwater, one sees not the gradual dissipation but the persistent evolution of racial appeals. Post-Horton, racial entreaties morphed into standard politics during the Clinton administration, and warped anew into hysteria concerning brown foreigners,

whether illegals or terrorists, during the Bush years. As with the Willie Horton debacle, all too often today’s dog whistle comes to be widely condemned as racism only after the damage has already been done.

## ■ COMMONSENSE RACISM

It seems that race agitates most whites at the unconscious level. But how? We can answer this in terms of commonsense racism, a concept briefly introduced back in Chapter Two. “Commonsense” evokes the overwhelming ordinariness, pervasiveness, and legitimacy of much social knowledge; it expresses the intuitive certainty that many things are just what they are, widely known, widely recognized, and not needing any further explanation.<sup>25</sup> For many in our society, whites and nonwhites too, racial beliefs operate in this fashion. For many, it simply seems “true,” an unquestioned matter of commonsense, that blacks prefer welfare to work, that undocumented immigrants breed crime, and that Islam spawns violence. How is this commonsense generated? Four different forces impel us to think in racist terms. I separate them below to make describing them easier, but in practice they are mutually reinforcing and difficult to distinguish.<sup>26</sup>

### SOCIAL LEARNING

The first time I turned on *The Wire*, I abruptly clicked it off. An HBO series built around urban devastation and drug crimes in the burnt wreckage of Baltimore, the show struck me as just another voyeuristic portrayal of ghetto dysfunction. It seemed a sicker version of the jangly reality TV ride-alongs that bring into livingrooms all across the country images of police officers interrogating groups of young black men attired in sagging pants and hoodies, or accosting Latinos leaned up against chain-link fences. More than simply over-representing nonwhites among the criminal class, such fodder strips the context from the lives of those it portrays. Oblivious to life stories, the camera reduces complex individuals to the sum total of the behavior that lands them in the lights’ glare. Their lives’ larger trajectory, including the structural forces that opened and shut various avenues leading to that moment, remain obscured by deep shadows. We don’t just learn that nonwhites commit crimes. We learn that they are criminals, and little else.

This is where *The Wire* differs. Despite my initial misgivings, over five seasons the show explored the interconnected lives of drug dealers and cops—and longshoremen, journalists, and bureaucrats—illuminating the complicated



humanity of those trapped by forces of urban deterioration. The more complete background shifted the perception of those perpetrating “crimes”: now this term seemed to include not only the street hoodlums but also those who would never be charged with breaking the law, yet who in the socially destructive dimensions of their actions seemed at least equally culpable of great social and moral wrongs. The long arc and broad field of view helped lead to a better understanding of those who acted reprehensibly and often self-destructively, while also revealing the responsibility borne and often shouldered by those with actual political and economic power.

Comparing *The Wire* to standard media fare—meaning not only Hollywood and TV, but also journalism—helps bring into focus the damage done by most media representations of race. Rather than treat nonwhites as complex persons, the media often reduce minorities to walking stereotypes: rapists, gang members, maids, terrorists, and so forth. White characters, though all too often also flat, nevertheless are typically the only ones allowed to blossom into multifaceted personalities, persons who respond to and also change their relations with others and, on occasion, alter their environment. As a result, media consumers learn to see nonwhites only as racial archetypes, while simultaneously being reminded that whites are unique individuals shaped by and in turn capable of shaping the world around them.

Beyond repeating tired stereotypes, by following the political debates of the day, media representations of minorities also greatly amplify dog whistle themes. In one striking example, media depictions of welfare over several decades tended to carry more black faces during presidential election years, and relatively more images of whites during periods of economic recession when the public was more sympathetic to the need for government assistance.<sup>27</sup> In another example, when Ronald Reagan first began to address unauthorized immigration as a national threat, this issue hardly merited attention among journalists. Within a few years, however, news stories proliferated on this topic, and the overwhelming majority of these used brown faces to illustrate the danger.<sup>28</sup> The adage that an image is worth a thousand words applies to the power of the media to “teach” about race. Often, the lessons are deeply imbued with racist stereotypes that buttress dog whistle themes torn from political campaigns.

The media is one component—albeit a very powerful one—of a larger process of social learning. We begin to learn about race as children, yet even as adults we continue to learn about race through a constant bombardment of messages, images, and storylines from myriad sources. In a society like ours, no one can escape a racial education that often occurs by osmosis, gradually filling one’s head with racial understandings of the social world.

In turn, social learning has a self-fulfilling character. Consider a striking experiment conducted several decades ago by Jane Elliott, a third-grade teacher in Riceville, Iowa, a town “so homogenous that many of her students had never seen an African American.”<sup>29</sup> The day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Elliott struggled to illustrate to her students the significance of King’s life. She struck upon the idea of teaching them what segregation meant. Elliott divided her students between those with blue and those with brown eyes. Discriminating first against the brown-eyed children, she put felt collars around their necks to further the differentiation. Then she began to favor the blue-eyed children, seating them at the front of the room, and giving them first choice of the toys at recess. The effects were profound. The brown-eyed children “were humiliated; they huddled together on the playground . . . They said almost nothing in class and barely spoke all day. The blue-eyed students, meanwhile, were relaxed, happy, unself-conscious participants in class.”<sup>30</sup> The next day, Elliott reversed the positions, elevating the brown-eyed kids and stigmatizing those with blue eyes. The brown-eyed children returned to being eager learners, but their blue-eyed classmates became downcast and withdrawn. These differences carried through to lessons about arithmetic and spelling. The stigmatized children “barely paid attention. They receded to the back of even these small groups. They spoke only if spoken to. They didn’t remember instructions. They were slow to respond. They got a lot of answers wrong.” In contrast, on the day these students were favored, “these same students responded like the exuberant, cognitively adept children they apparently were.”<sup>31</sup>

Just one day as a disfavored child produced these heart-breaking changes. Imagine the toll of a whole childhood spent facing belittling messages. Now consider how children’s responses to years of mistreatment would confirm the very stereotyping that produced the harm in the first place. Withdrawn and anxious from mistreatment, these students’ poor performances would only harden the destructive suspicion of their inferiority. The insights of the liberal race theorists from the first half of the twentieth century seem relevant again. As Gunnar Myrdal summarized, “All our attempts to reach scientific explanations of why the Negroes are what they are and why they live as they do have regularly led to determinants on the white side of the race line.”<sup>32</sup> Social learning both draws on and reinforces racial patterns.

#### THE ENVIRONMENT

As with social learning, the environment both teaches about race and has a self-fulfilling dynamic. By the environment, I mean our built world, for instance

the narrow streets just north of the University of California, Berkeley, where I teach, which wind up through hills overlooking San Francisco Bay. Gorgeous views complement the varied homes in the area, an architecturally interesting mélange of Tudor, Craftsman, and California Mission style, and the people you see walking their dogs, cycling through the neighborhood, and driving by typically exude the confidence common to privilege—and they are almost exclusively white; a nonwhite face may cause a double-take. Looking further north, though, you spy Richmond, home to oil refineries, urban blight, extreme poverty, and lots of nonwhites. Looking south, you discern Oakland, with a downtown enjoying a renaissance, but also with pockets of intense poverty and spikes of violence, some in black neighborhoods, some in Latino barrios. There's also an Oakland Chinatown, constantly rejuvenated with new immigrants.

Combined with the stereotypes acquired through social learning, these environmental differences make the idea of race seem real, powerful, and supremely relevant. The strong correlation between whites and wealth makes each seem an attribute of the other: wealthy people are white; and white people are wealthy, or soon might be. Likewise, the environment conjoins poverty with nonwhiteness. Poor people are brown and black; black and brown people are poor, or curious exceptions. Sometimes the environment also links race to foreignness: Americans are white; browns and yellows are perpetual strangers. More deeply, these different environments seemingly testify to racial character: white folks keep their neighborhoods nice and work hard to earn the good things in life. In contrast, nonwhites trash their homes and streets, refuse to lift themselves out of poverty, and cling to foreign ways.

All of this seems “obvious,” but this very quality of being commonsense depends on the environment obscuring underlying racial processes. It's very difficult to discern the racial advantages that favored those whites who reside in the beautiful North Berkeley abodes: the education and jobs they excelled at through hard work but also with help from racially informed presumptions of competence; the government programs and market opportunities open to their parents and grandparents, but closed by racial barriers to many others. Nor can you readily observe the racial mechanics that over decades have trapped nonwhites in parts of Richmond and Oakland, where areas of concentrated poverty severely limit opportunities, and older generations often have little to pass on in terms of net worth because past segregation in housing, jobs, and education truncated their own potential. Beyond that, it's almost impossible to easily perceive how behavioral norms conducive to success are fostered by settings in which success is possible, while behavioral patterns likely to lead to further marginalization are often encouraged in destructive environments

without exits. The social world through which we move reflects centuries of racism that extends right up to the present. But this is hard to grasp in its particulars. Instead, we see clearly only the results, and with the underlying causes hidden, we tend to accept the extant world as a testament to the implacable truth of racial stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> The environment itself seems to confirm the power of race to explain group differences, and also group fates.

#### COGNITIVE ROUTINES

Social learning and the environment constantly bombard us with racial messages. How do we process this information? To handle the millions of bits of data we daily receive, our brains have developed a number of cognitive routines for efficiently sifting and sorting information. Many of these processes contribute to race's power. Here, I briefly mention three aspects of human cognition that seem especially helpful in understanding the power of race in shaping how we engage others. Yet underlying this discussion is the essential caveat discussed when I first introduced the concept of commonsense racism: while these cognitive elements may be hardwired into how humans think, *race* is not natural to our thinking. Our neural networks may process information in ways that facilitate racial beliefs, but the actual content of our thoughts remain a matter of society and environment.<sup>36</sup>

*Categorization.* Among our standard repertoire of cognitive tricks, perhaps the most important to race is that the human mind leaps at the chance to categorize others into groups, and then discriminates on that basis. We're deeply accustomed to quickly sorting people into categories, and then to judging individuals in our group much more favorably than others. This dynamic of in-group favoritism and out-group mistreatment operates even when the basis for distinguishing between groups is transparently arbitrary, for instance after a group of children count off, one-two, into opposing teams.<sup>37</sup> Making group distinctions is natural to us, though again the actual groupings reflect social arrangements. The propensity for humans to categorize, and to favor their own while disfavoring others, goes some way toward explaining the power of race in social relations.

*Automaticity.* Almost equally importantly, the tendency to categorize occurs unconsciously and automatically. Once you gain familiarity with racial groups and their relative social positions—unavoidable knowledge when living more than briefly in the United States—racial misjudgments will occur even before you know it. Indeed, because of race's high social salience and its typically easy visual identification, “of all the dimensions on which people categorize each other, race is among the quickest and most automatic.”<sup>38</sup> The social science on

this is abundantly clear. As we encounter each other in the social world, our minds have already recognized racial distinctions and activated racial stereotypes, no matter how much we might wish it were otherwise.

*Loss aversion.* A third cognitive dynamic, albeit one not connected closely to groups, also bears mention. We tend to react to losses very differently from how we respond to unrealized gains. If someone takes \$5 from you, you're likely to resent it much more than if someone fails to give you \$5 they owe you. Rationally, there should be no difference: in either case, you're out five bucks. Perhaps so, but we nevertheless tend to experience losses more intensely. This dynamic seems relevant to understanding the high level of resentment expressed when whites confront demands for integration. Many take the status quo as a neutral starting point. Certainly this reflects racial ideology, which seeks to assure whites that their superior position is warranted rather than illegitimate. But it seems likely to also reflect a cognitive predisposition to greatly resent any effort to take away what we presently hold.<sup>37</sup> This same predisposition also leads us to undervalue potential gains. Thus, even if gains from integration exceed the losses, the losses will be counted much more heavily in how whites experience them.

#### MOTIVES

Our minds automatically process information gleaned about race from society and the environment, contributing to a commonsense about race. Contrast this with strategic racists: they interact with race consciously and purposefully. This may lead to a sense that there's a division between those who unconsciously engage with race, and those who do so completely mindfully. This division is too stark. Instead, engagements with race occur along a continuum between fully strategic and fully automatic, with everyone somewhere along that spectrum. This means that strategic racists both manipulate and draw on commonsense ideas. And it also means that commonsense racism involves some element of motivation.

We can start with strategic racism, combining cold calculations and also a reliance on existing racial ideas. We've seen this exemplified in politicians from George Wallace to Mitt Romney, brainstorming over how best to stoke racial grievances; and by William Rehnquist and Clint Bolick, working diligently to harness civil rights rhetoric to enhance the plutocrats' power. Notice here, though, that strategic racism is not simply the purview of presidential candidates and political operatives; instead, it has always functioned at every layer of the social stratum. To give an example, consider Justice Frank Murphy's

dissent from *Korematsu v. United States*, a World War II case which blessed the internment of roughly 110,000 persons of Japanese descent, the majority of them American citizens. Murphy vigorously objected, emphasizing the combined racial *and* financial motives of those pushing for prison camps:

Special interest groups were extremely active in applying pressure for mass evacuation. Mr. Austin E. Anson, managing secretary of the Salinas Vegetable Grower—Shipper Association, has frankly admitted that "We're charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We do. It's a question of whether the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown men. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over. . . . They undersell the white man in the markets. . . . They work their women and children while the white farmer has to pay wages for his help. If all the Japs were removed tomorrow, we'd never miss them in two weeks, because the white farmers can take over and produce everything the Jap grows. And we don't want them back when the war ends, either."<sup>38</sup>

Anson laid bare his ulterior motives for favoring the removal of Japanese farmers, but like all strategic racists, he also at least partially subscribed to the racial antipathies he endeavored to exploit.

From here, motives become more attenuated as persons adopt particular ideas depending not on their material interests but on how these notions project their self-image and, for the privileged, confirm society's basic fairness.<sup>39</sup> For instance, the dominance of colorblindness today surely ties back to motives, not on the fully conscious level, but in many whites being drawn to conceptions of race that affirm their sense of being moral persons neither responsible for nor benefited by racial inequality. Colorblindness offers whites racial expiation: they cannot be racist if they lack malice; nor can they be responsible for inequality, since this reflects differences in group mores. Colorblindness also complements whites on a superior culture that explains their social position. In addition it empathizes with whites as racism's real victims when government favors minorities through affirmative action or welfare payments. Finally, colorblindness affirms that whites are moral when they oppose measures to promote integration because it's allegedly their principled objection to any use of race that drives them, not bias. Colorblindness has not gained adherents because of its analytic insight (that race is completely disconnected from social practices blinks reality); rather, it thrives because it comforts whites regarding their innocence, reassures them that their privilege is legitimate, commiserates with their victimization, and hides from them their hostility toward racial equality.

Finally, people seem “motivated” to act racially in the even looser sense of seeking to minimize their discomfort in dealing with race.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the foundational questions of self bound up in world views, this involves managing immediate anxiety in interactions with others. Seeking to avoid strain or embarrassment, we search for strategies that help us avoid or manage unsettling situations. Here again colorblindness often comes in, though now not as a complex set of ideas so much as an interactional strategy. Many whites find it stressful to engage with someone nonwhite, at least partly because they worry they may come across as prejudiced. In such settings, “one approach many Whites adopt is *strategic colorblindness*: avoidance of talking about race—or even acknowledging racial difference—in an effort to avoid the appearance of bias.”<sup>41</sup> Especially in cross-racial encounters, many whites opt to act as if they simply don’t see race. Not altogether surprisingly, this often backfires, as their evident discomfort and strained self-management causes them to be perceived as more prejudiced.<sup>44</sup> Motivation, in this context, is less akin to deliberately comparing costs and benefits, or even subtly weighing which ideas protect one’s ego, and more like managing anxiety or discomfort.

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The thousand-pound gorilla in American politics is that race convinces many whites to vote against their interests. How does it do so?

To start, framing the question as whites voting against their interests glosses the important fact that, when they respond to racial appeals, some whites *are* voting according to their interests. Along the dimensions of racial and class status, as well as in terms of protecting settled advantages in jobs, neighborhoods, and schools, some whites have actual interests in supporting continued white dominance.

But even granting this, there’s strong evidence, including from the Willie Horton episode, that most who “hear” the dog whistle do so only unconsciously. We should be clear that commonsense racism does far more than conscious self-interest to drive the receptivity of most whites to dog whistle appeals. Without entirely dismissing actual interests, it’s nevertheless clear that racial pandering works primarily because many whites are susceptible to subtle messages that present minorities as the major threat in their lives. Reflect on how the four general dynamics that contribute to commonsense racism—social learning, environmental influence, cognitive routines, and motives—play out for most whites in a political environment defined by dog whistling and colorblindness.

- Whites learn about race through social learning in a white-dominated society, and integral to this education by osmosis is a massive political effort to subliminally convince whites that they are in peril.
- The environment reflects centuries of white privilege, and this too increases race’s subterranean power, making race seem powerfully real, and also, making race a ready way to explain the position of one’s group and indeed one’s own fate.
- As with all of us, the minds of whites conspire against them: they think along racial lines categorically and automatically in ways very difficult to control, and tend to resent as losses any diminution in their status or privilege. Meanwhile, far from learning to counteract their biased judgments, colorblindness constantly tells whites that the way to get beyond race is to not consciously consider race.
- Finally, even if not motivated in a strategic way, whites are trapped by the desire to protect their self-image as well as the seeming legitimacy of their group position, and thus tend to adopt ideas about race and racism that provide absolution—ideas often crafted by dog whistle entrepreneurs to insinuate minority inferiority and to foster a sense of white victimization.

Dog whistle narratives trade on but also shape commonsense ideas of race, all too easily triggering approbation from whites privileged by race but anxious in a changing world. Rightwing race-baiting works because strategic racists are able to appeal to racial commonsense, ultimately manipulating broad segments of the white population into voting in ways that hurt themselves and wreck the middle class.